

# REPORT

## **Institute of Museum and Library Services Advisory Group Meeting on Research in Library and Information Science February 26, 1999**

As the Information Age continues to change the ways in which Americans work, play, think and learn, there is a growing demand for tools to help information seekers locate and evaluate the information they need. If librarians are to continue their traditional role of facilitating the search for information, they must develop new tools and techniques for organizing and navigating the information glut. Libraries must also adapt to technological and social changes if they are to remain dynamic information providers. Research in library and information science is vital to the survival of libraries as centers of freely accessible information in a democratic society.

The Library Services and Technology Act of 1996 (LSTA), administered by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), is the only Federal grant program specifically designed to support library research. Under the statute, the Director of IMLS is directed to "establish a program of awarding grants or entering into contracts or cooperative agreements to enhance the quality of library services nationwide." This program, which includes funding for "research and demonstration projects related to the improvement of libraries, education in library and information science, enhancement of library services through effective and efficient use of new technologies, and dissemination of information derived from such projects," was established by IMLS as its National Leadership Grants program in 1998. The first National Leadership Grant awards were announced in September 1998.

On February 26, 1999, IMLS invited a group of leaders in library and information science to review the results of the first year, to evaluate the revised program guidelines for 1999, and to make recommendations for future research funding policies and priorities. This report is the result of that meeting.

Meeting participants were asked to address the following questions:

- ◆ What are the most pressing research needs of the library and information science profession? Can or should these be formalized in a research agenda?
- ◆ What basic requirements, if any, should be established for research and demonstration proposals (e.g. hypothesis, methodology)?
- ◆ Should the terms "research" and "demonstration" be defined, and, if so, how?
- ◆ Should demonstration projects without research components be allowed?

*What are the most pressing research needs of the library and information science profession? Can or should these be formalized in a research agenda?*

Mary Jo Lynch, Director of Research at the American Library Association, reviewed previous attempts to establish research agendas for the library profession before the Federal funding program for libraries was transferred to IMLS from the U.S. Department of Education. Lynch reported that efforts by the Federal government to create a national research agenda have met with resistance from researchers, primarily because there was never any commitment to fund the work. There has been no follow-up to determine if these agenda have had any impact on research activity in the field. Participants discussed the pros and cons of developing a specific research agenda. On the positive side, a research agenda can focus the profession's attention on solving a particular problem and can be used to sustain and increase funding to support research. On the negative side, it is difficult for a professional community as large and diverse as library and information science to agree on a single agenda. Many potential research issues were discussed, including measures of performance for all types of libraries; metrics for lifelong learning; technological applications to improve processes for organizing, presenting, and finding information; economic models for evaluating library services; and improvement of services to underserved populations. The group did not recommend the development of a national agenda because they were reluctant to speak for

the entire library community in the development of such an agenda. Instead, participants urged IMLS to take a leadership role in stimulating discussion and in gathering active input from the variety of constituencies that make up the library community. The group recommended that IMLS convey a message of practical flexibility in funding priorities and encourage applicants to think creatively to broaden the boundaries of library research.

Group members also felt that IMLS could play an important role in improving the quality of library and information science research by identifying success factors for sustained and significant research projects. Stephen Griffin, Program Director in the Division of Information and Intelligent Systems at the National Science Foundation and director of its Digital Library Initiative, spoke of NSF's role as one of stewardship of its constituency, which primarily includes University-based researchers in computer science and technology. NSF views itself as funding "conversations rather than meetings" and "programs, not projects." NSF has created an ongoing program of sharing research results within its research community and gathering input from its constituents in setting funding priorities.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Fund larger and longer research projects, even if it means funding fewer projects; encourage successful investigators to apply for funding for continued research and follow-on activities
- Promote sharing of research among principal investigators and broad dissemination of results to the profession
- Encourage interdisciplinary research and promote cooperative projects with other funders, including other Federal agencies

What basic requirements, if any, should be established for research and demonstration proposals (e.g. hypothesis, methodology)?

In the first year of the program, a large number of applications were received in the research and demonstration category that did not include a rigorous methodology for testing hypotheses, gathering data, and evaluating results. The research and demonstration category appeared to

have been chosen by many applicants simply because the projects for which they were seeking funds did not fit clearly into any of the other three funding categories (education and training, preservation or digitization of materials, or library and museum collaborations). The 1999 guidelines were revised to direct applicants to "pose a question and explain through the plan of work how the question will be investigated, how data will be gathered and analyzed, and how results will be evaluated and disseminated." The group concluded that this revision would encourage better proposals.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Recommendation**

- Retain provisions for research and demonstration proposals incorporated in 1999 guidelines

Should the terms "research" and "demonstration" be defined, and, if so, how?

Because library service benefits from research with practical applications, it is important to link research to practice. Defining "research" is difficult as there is no agreement even among researchers as to what constitutes true research. However, there is a continuum of valid projects from basic research through testing and validation to demonstration before change can be effectively implemented. The group encouraged IMLS to seek innovative ways to involve the whole range of information scientists in the process. Library schools have a role in training librarians in research methods and in understanding research. Practitioners have a role in determining what questions need to be asked, knowing when to seek help from researchers, understanding the need for quality data, and testing proposed approaches in real-life conditions. The library community is a rich resource that should be encouraged and nurtured. Better communication is needed between researchers and practitioners.

#### **Recommendations:**

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<sup>1</sup> 65 proposals were received in the research and demonstration category in 1998; this number dropped to 35 in 1999. IMLS staff attribute much of this decrease to the guidelines change and note that the percentage of proposals funded in this category rose from 15% to nearly 40%.

- Retain provisions for research and demonstration proposals incorporated in 1999 guidelines rather than developing more specific definitions
- Encourage collaborative approaches to research and demonstration projects, involving both researchers and practitioners
- Ensure that demonstration projects have a strong evaluation component

*Should demonstration projects without research components be allowed?*

Because of the practical need for libraries to have tested models before they invest resources in implementation, and because researchers are often not the same investigators who can or should carry out demonstration projects, participants felt that demonstration projects not tied to specific research were appropriate. In addition, demonstration projects might test proposed approaches without previous basic research having been conducted.

**Recommendation**

- Retain eligibility of proposals for stand-alone demonstration projects

**Summary:**

Participants encouraged IMLS to take a leadership role in setting funding priorities for research in library and information science. IMLS can fulfill this responsibility by fostering ongoing discussion within the various communities that impact libraries, by encouraging creative proposals that broaden the boundaries of library research, and by promoting broad dissemination of research results.

## **List of Participants**

Dr. Nancy Kranich (Moderator)  
Associate Dean of Libraries  
New York University

Ms. Liz Bishoff  
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Colorado Digitization Project

Dr. Rebecca Danvers  
Director, Office of Research and Technology  
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Dr. Karen Drabentstott  
Associate Professor, School of Information  
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Dr. Leigh Estabrook  
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Stephen M. Griffin  
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